

Session 6: Journeying through the darkness

Stillness

Take a moment to become still as we begin this session: As you come to the prayer today, notice what is on your mind . . . let each thought that comes drop away . . . notice how you are feeling at this moment . . . can you put names on them? . . . can you locate where in your body they are? . . . notice how you are in your body today . . . relaxed or tense . . . cold or warm . . . tired or wide awake . . . how is your body? . . . however you are, let God look at you with love and welcome you to this time together . . . We will now hear this session's reading from the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 27: 15- 25

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah? For he realised that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him. Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!' So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children.'

Reflection

As we walk alongside Jesus through the events of Holy Week we may find insights about ourselves reflected back in many different ways, as participants in this cosmic drama. Inigo invites us to enter into these events prayerfully throughout the Third Week, or phase, of the Exercises, noticing which aspects touch something in our own lives and hearts, and to ask for the grace to listen to what God is saying to us personally.

It is ironic that the outcome of this momentous week appears to lie in the hands of a fearful and indecisive human being, who nevertheless wields great secular power. When it comes to the fateful decision about what to do with Jesus, the buck stops with Pilate, as governor of the province. We find him here grappling with his conscience. He knows that Jesus is innocent. He knows that the demand to have Jesus killed is motivated by jealousy and the perceived threat he poses to official power. And, crucially, Pilate has been warned by his wife not to have

anything to do with this immoral act, and she in turn has been warned in a dream.

We all face moral dilemmas in our lives. Sometimes the choices we make can derail another person's wellbeing or even their life, or affect the future of a whole community. We too may know, in our hearts, what is the right course to choose, but there are many things that can cause us to abdicate our moral responsibility. Pilate is afraid of triggering a riot and bringing the force of Rome down upon them all. We may not be in danger of causing a riot, but we may well shy away from upsetting our friends or family, neighbours or work colleagues. For many of us there may be a dread of confrontation, and a tendency to take the line of least resistance in any conflict situation.

But Pilate has another source of guidance – his wife's dream. What might this dream be telling us today? You might want to take this into prayer and ask for the grace to recognise those deeper streams of guidance that are prompting your own heart to act justly. It isn't necessarily about dreams. It's about noticing those moments that we know are directing us to that source of truth in the core of our being, but these signposts are very easy to ignore when we are faced with the clamouring crowd of fears and insecurities triggered by the pressure of immediate circumstances.

We recall how Pilate had famously asked Jesus 'What is truth?' Now he has to decide whether the promptings of the deeper dream, or the demands of the crowd, are the truth. He knows that Jesus is innocent. The crowd, however, whipped up into a frenzy, have convinced themselves that Jesus' guilt is the truth. 'Alternative facts', it appears, were as alive and active 2000 years ago as they are in our own times, fuelled by the same base motives of fear and jealousy and deliberately manipulated by the chief priests and elders. Who are 'the chief priests and elders' in our own times? Who are the opinion shapers and how are they manipulating our choices? Will we choose our future course, both personally and collectively, under the spell of covert propagandists and social media trolls, or under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Finally, Pilate washes his hands of the matter. He abdicates his responsibility. He throws truth to the winds, and it is blown away, with tragic consequences. Are we also tempted to abdicate our personal responsibility for the direction the world of the future will take? Do we think there's nothing we can do to change things? Jesus was never so apparently helpless as in the events of Holy Week, standing defenceless against the forces of evil – and never more powerful!

Talk to God

Bring to prayer any particular moral dilemmas you may be facing. Do you know deep down which course best reflects the truth that you know in your heart? Is anything working against that truth and tempting you to choose the line of least resistance?

Sometimes we find that the voice of the 'crowd' – the crowd of our fears and insecurities, or the crowd of peer pressure for example – is very much louder and more forceful than the still small voice of truth in our hearts. Which voice do you truly desire to follow? Can you ask for the grace to have the courage of your deepest convictions in the choices that lie before you?



How aware are you of the insidious malicious persuaders in our times, who are deliberately manipulating our choices as a human family, for their own ends and to bolster their own power? These agents of persuasion are on a mission to undermine our quest, and our calling, to evolve into the best we can be, just as they attempted to subvert Jesus' mission of love and redemption. Can you ask for the grace to recognise them and act against them?

Make a note in your journal of any ways in which you recognise yourself in the reaction of Pilate or in any other part of the narrative of Holy Week. What do you feel this recognition is teaching you?

May we collectively ask for the grace to recognise the divine voice of authentic truth and resist all the malevolent fakes that daily surround us.